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## SPECIAL REPORT

### Questions and Answers on Education Policy

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# Questions and Answers on Education Policy

During the course of the debate on education, Republicans have used false arguments to distract and confuse the issues. This Special Report responds to these arguments and sets the record straight on the common-sense policies supported by Democrats to enhance accountability and improve student achievement. The report answers questions on the following topics: the Federal role in improving public schools; education block grants; class size reduction; after-school programs; school modernization; school choice; and public schools.

## Federal Role in Improving Public Schools

### ***Are education policy decisions controlled by the Federal Government?***

**No.** The Federal Government plays a limited role in education policy, accounting for only five percent of all education funding while States and local communities provide 95 percent of total funding. The Federal government is a partner with States, local communities and schools to help ensure that all children receive a quality education.

### ***Example***

Federal education programs are designed to provide flexibility for local communities to achieve specific education goals. Title I, the largest Federal elementary and secondary education program, provides targeted assistance to economically disadvantaged children to ensure they are able to master the basics in math and reading. The Title I program is not a series of policy dictates and regulatory requirements—it provides flexible support for local innovation and reform. Title I supports academic improvement for the neediest children and holds schools accountable for results. Local schools have broad flexibility in how they use the money as long as they demonstrate that they will be using it effectively to improve student learning.

### ***What is the Federal role in education policy?***

Since the 1960s, the Federal Government has worked in partnership with States, local communities and schools to ensure that all children receive a quality education. Federal education programs reflect a long-standing, bipartisan commitment to helping local communities improve student achievement by providing assistance that focuses on our neediest children and on activities in which national leadership can play a critical role to spur innovation and accelerate reforms.

#### ***Example***

**Targeted assistance.** In 1998, the General Accounting Office (GAO) reported that Federal education funding formulas provided an additional \$4.73 for each poor child for every dollar provided for all children, while States provided 62 cents per poor child for every dollar provided for all children.

**Federal leadership.** In 1994, the Federal Goals 2000 program was established to help States and local communities develop their own education standards and assessments. Currently, 48 States and the District of Columbia have completed the development of State content standards for all children, and the two other States (Oklahoma and Montana) have promoted challenging standards at the local level.

### ***How does the Federal Government work with State and local communities to improve public schools?***

The Federal Government plays a critical role in the local-State-Federal partnership by working to fill gaps in State and local support for education when critical needs arise and by providing support that spurs innovation. In addition, the Federal Government is uniquely positioned to help States and local communities share information about what works best to improve education and provide the support they need to incorporate good practices in their schools.

## ***Example***

Federal programs have helped local communities to:

- increase the percentage of public schools with access to the Internet from 35 percent in 1994 to 85 percent in 1998;
- hire nearly 30,000 new qualified teachers to reduce class sizes in the early grades; and
- provide more than half a million children access to quality after school programs.

## ***Are States and local communities awash in Federal regulations? Is it true that up to 50 percent of all paperwork is caused by Federal regulations?***

This claim is factually inaccurate. The claim that 50 percent of the paperwork done by schools is mandated by the Federal Government is based on a 1990 study by the Ohio General Assembly, Legislative Office of Education Oversight, entitled “Public School Reporting Requirements.” That study, however, actually attributed only 20 percent of paperwork requirements to the Federal Government.

The study identified a total of 330 forms that districts and schools might have to complete. The study attributed 173 of these forms to Federal programs and concluded that 50 percent of the forms were required by the Federal Government. However, only 41 percent of the 173—about 71 forms—were designated as mandatory, or required of all districts. That means approximately one fifth (71 of 330) of the forms identified in the Ohio study were actually required of all districts by the Federal Government, not 50 percent.

## ***Has the Department of Education reduced its regulations and bureaucracy?***

Yes. Since the beginning of the Clinton Administration, paperwork requirements have been reduced significantly. The 1994 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) called for significant changes in the way the Department of Education does business with States and local schools.

### ***Example***

- The 1994 reauthorization of ESEA resulted in the elimination of two-thirds of ESEA regulations;
- The reauthorization also established the option for States to submit a single, consolidated State application, instead of separate applications; and
- States reported in FY 1996 that the consolidated application slashed paperwork requirements by 85 percent.

### ***Are Federal education dollars reaching local school districts?***

Yes. A new GAO study has found that 99 percent of the appropriations for 10 elementary and secondary education programs administered by the Department of Education were distributed to the States. The States, in turn, collectively distributed 94 percent of those funds to local agencies.

## **Education Block Grants**

### ***Are block grants the best way to improve education?***

No. Block grants are a blank check that eliminates the Federal role in the local-State-Federal education partnership. Targeted Federal support for education has ensured parents and communities that their children have access to quality education—despite race, gender, ethnic origin, or disabilities.

The Federal Government continues to work to improve education for all children by targeting resources to economically disadvantaged students and to children with special needs. In addition, Federal support for education ensures that national priorities such as smaller class sizes and integration of technology into classroom instruction are advanced.

***Would the Republican “Straight A’s” initiative improve education?***

No. The “Straight A’s” initiative is an education block grant and it’s too extreme. The “Straight A’s” block grant give States—the governor and State legislature in each State the authority to combine into a block grant Federal funds from 10 different education programs. More than 80 percent of all Federal support to elementary and secondary education would be included in the block grant. The bill amounts to a blank check for States. Education dollars are scarce and we cannot afford to waste them.

The “Straight A’s” block grant would centralize all education decision making, related to Federal funding, into the hands of governors and State legislatures—parents, teachers, principals and school boards would no longer have a say in how Federal dollars are spent. All schools would no longer be held accountable for results, and National priorities such as targeted funding for the neediest students, smaller class sizes, and technology in classrooms would be eliminated.

***Would the “Straight A’s” bill return power and decision making to local communities?***

States and local communities already have control over education decision-making. The “Straight A’s” block grant would dramatically alter the local-State-Federal partnership and shift all control of Federal education funding away from parents and communities and to governors and State legislatures. Currently, Federal education programs such as Title I, which targets assistance to economically disadvantaged children, are designed locally and ensure that parents are a part of the process.

***What are the “accountability” provisions in the “Straight A’s” block grant bill?***

The “Straight A’s” block grant would replace current fiscal and performance accountability provisions for Federal education programs with a weak and almost meaningless “performance agreement.” States would be able to use their funds for “any educational purpose permitted by State law,” and the Secretary would be required to approve nearly any five-year “performance agreement” proposed by a State, even if it included a flawed assessment mechanism, was accompanied by meaningless indicators of performance or was of low quality.

***When would States be held “accountable”  
under the “Straight A’s” block grant bill?***

The “accountability” comes five years after the “performance agreement” has been established—at the time student achievement is measured. Throughout the five years there would be no guarantees of quality. After the fifth year, the program would be “evaluated,” but for many students it would be too late—a child who was in junior high would be graduating by the time any questions were asked. Parents should not wait five years to see if their child is receiving a quality education—real accountability gives parents the tools they need now to improve achievement.

***What would the role of parents, teachers and local officials  
be if the “Straight A’s” block grant bill was enacted?***

Parents and teachers would lose their role in shaping how Federal education funding would be spent. Currently, parents and teachers have an active role in how Federal funds are used to improve student achievement through Federal education programs that focus on standards-based reforms, teacher training, early reading, and how to integrate technology in the classroom. Parents are involved in both the front end planning and design, and in the ongoing implementation of Federal education programs. We should not do anything to reduce or undermine their role in education—we should increase it.

## **Class Size Reduction**

***Do smaller class sizes improve student achievement?***

Yes. Research shows that putting children in small classes in their early years leads to higher achievement all the way through school, especially for poor and minority students.

***Example***

The STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio) research project in Tennessee has collected 14 years of data that prove conclusively that children in small classes achieve at higher levels. Researchers found that children in classes of fewer than 18 students are:

- more likely to graduate on time and less likely to drop out;

- more likely to have been enrolled in honors classes and graduate in the top ten percent of their class; and
- more likely to take SAT or ACT exams, indicating that they plan to go to college.

***Are teachers hired through the class size reduction initiative “Federal” teachers?***

No. The Federal Government distributes the money directly to local communities. Local communities, in turn, hire teachers based on their own established hiring practices.

***Does the class size reduction initiative contain provisions to allow communities to tailor the program to their needs?***

Yes. While maintaining a clear focus on lowering class size to 18 in the early grades, the Class Size Reduction Program provides local communities with considerable flexibility in how to achieve this objective and in the use of funds provided by the program.

***Example***

- School districts are free to decide which schools and which early grades will participate in the class size reduction program—when they meet the goals they can expand the program to other grades.
- School districts can use class size reduction program funds to recruit qualified teachers through strategies such as signing bonuses, internships and scholarships to undergraduates in teacher preparation programs in exchange for a commitment to teach in the school district.
- Up to 15 percent of the class size reduction funds can be used to support professional development for teachers, so they are fully prepared to teach with proven practices.



***How complicated is it for local schools to participate in the class size initiative?***

The Class Size Reduction Program application is one page long and takes no more than 10 minutes to fill out. In addition, the program is formula-based, so no grant writing is required.

***Why not let States choose to reduce class size or improve teacher quality—instead of mandating class size?***

The class size reduction program is not a mandate—it is a voluntary and flexible program. Overcrowded classrooms are a National problem that deserves dedicated funding to ensure that the needs of local communities are met. The program allows communities to structure the program to meet their needs. Local communities can decide to reduce class sizes in the first grade, recruit elementary teachers, or provide mentoring to teachers to ensure they are teaching to the best of their ability.

## **After-School Programs**

***Is there enough access to quality after-school programs?***

**No.** Studies have found that at least five million children—and possibly as many as 15 million—are left alone at home after school each week. This year, more than 2,000 communities applied for 184 after-school grants through the 21st Century Learning Center after-school program. Parents around the Nation are desperate for more supervised activities for their children after school.

***Do quality after-school programs effect student achievement levels?***

**Yes.** Research shows that quality after-school programs can help raise achievement levels in reading and math. In addition, research shows that quality after-school programs can improve school attendance, reduce juvenile crime and reduce risk of children becoming victims of crime. During the period after school juvenile crime is at its highest level and children are at most in danger of being a victim of violence.

## School Modernization

### ***Should the Federal Government help local communities modernize schools?***

Yes. The average public school is 42 years old and the cost to repair schools around the Nation is overwhelming. The GAO estimates that it would cost \$112 billion to bring the Nation's schools into good overall condition. Local communities have been unable to keep up with the problem of crumbling schools and now the problem is acute. The Federal Government is well-positioned to provide assistance to local communities to help turn the schools around nationwide.

### ***How would the Federal government help local communities modernize schools?***

Democrats support **S. 1454**, the *Public School Modernization and Overcrowding Relief Act of 1999* (PS MORE). The bill would provide resources for local communities to leverage additional funding to rebuild, modernize, and reduce overcrowding in more than 6,000 local public schools. The school modernization plan provides Federal tax credits to pay the interest on \$24.8 billion in school construction bonds.

## School Choice

### ***Aren't Democrats just supporting the status quo and limiting options for parents to send their children to a good school?***

No. Democrats support strong, immediate action in turning around low performing schools. For parents who feel that they are not satisfied with their neighborhood school, Democrats support options within the public school system that allows parents to choose public schools tailored to the needs of their children such as charter schools and magnet schools.

## Public Schools

### ***Are public schools failing?***

**No.** Student achievement is rising across the Nation according to many indicators. Performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has increased, particularly in reading, math, and science and more students are taking rigorous courses. However, not all schools and all children are excelling. More needs to be done to help all schools and all children succeed.

### ***Example***

- Average reading scores increased from 1994 to 1998 in all three grades tested (4, 8, and 12).
- Average performance in math has improved since 1978 for all three age groups tested and in every quartile, with the largest gains made by nine-year-olds.
- The average math score is at its highest level in 26 years.
- The combined verbal and math scores on the SAT increased 19 points from 1982 to 1997, with the largest gain of 15 points occurring between 1992 and 1997.
- Since 1982, the percentage of graduates taking biology, chemistry, and physics has doubled, rising from ten percent in 1982 to 21 percent in 1994.

### ***Do the American people support public schools?***

**Yes.** For three consecutive years, Americans have described education as their top priority (Pew Research Center for the People and Press). According to a recent ABC news survey, 79 percent of Americans said that they believe that “improving education and the schools” will be “very important” when choosing a president next year, more important than any other issue (ABC News, September 5, 1999).

***Do the American people support  
increasing spending on education?***

Yes. 73 percent of Americans favor increased investment in education, more than any of the other 19 issues polled (University of Chicago, August 17, 1999). Furthermore, a recent survey showed that a majority of Americans are so committed to strengthening education that they would be willing to pay more to increase the overall investment in education:

- 75 percent of Americans were willing to pay \$200 more in taxes each year; and
- 55 percent were willing to pay \$500 more in taxes (National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government Survey, September 7, 1999).